

Rape Culture and Abuse Against Women in Past and Modern Literature

Research Thesis

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by

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Introduction:

It is nearly impossible in the current day to turn on a news channel, to play a podcast, or to read a newspaper without coming across a headline or hearing a story about sexual and physical abuse against women. The media is captivated by stories of battered women finally coming forward to share their tales of mistreatment by powerful and affluent men. It seems that after centuries and centuries of perpetrators escaping punishment for their misuse of power, the mainstream audience is coming to the realization that domestic violence and rape and sexual coercion is wrong. It's unfair to say that the world has never recoiled at the thought of a battered woman, that there has never been justice served, but a closer look reveals more bias and skepticism than one would think there should be. When questions like "Well, what was she wearing?" and "How much did she drink?" are asked over and over again in cases of sexual assault, society must know that there is still work to be done. When victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them, there is still work to be done. There are laws that need to be passed and opinions that need to be changed and there is still a long way to go, but even so, there has been a clear, noticeable shift in the public's opinion of abuse victims, and nowhere is this more evident than in modern day literature.

The term "rape culture" has been around for at least fifty years. (Harding 1). And yet, it is still an extremely difficult term to describe. It's less of a term than a feeling. It's how women are shamed for their sexuality, when men are congratulated for it. It's in the way that bystanders will record a young girl's rape and share it on social media instead of stepping in and helping her. It's in every joke about how she deserved it, about how she probably wanted it, about how maybe it was her "final wish", a phrase used by an Ohio State University student on the night of August 11th, 2012, when he saw a video of a fifteen-year-old girl being raped by two boys. The student,

joking that the girl must be dead after seeing her limp body swinging to and fro between two high school football players, was not aware that he was witnessing one of the most high-profile rape cases in the modern day United States: the Steubenville High School rape case (Harding 49). And yet, as he sat in his dorm room, laughing and mocking the “dead” girl on his phone screen, it was apparent that he took none of this crime seriously. *That* is rape culture. Mocking a victim for laughs. For a couple of half-hearted snorts from your buddy beside you.

There are a plethora of other examples that can be examined in modern day events to explain what exactly rape culture is, but Kate Harding, the author of the book: *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture – and What We Can Do About It*, says it best:

The Problem itself is the cumulative effect of so many people, working through so many organs and institutions, to deliver a constant stream of sexist bullshit that trivializes the crime of rape and automatically awards the benefit of the doubt to the accused. *If she hadn't been drinking, this never would have happened. If she's had sex before, how do we know she didn't want it this time?... "Date rape" is just sex that a woman regrets the next morning.* (Harding 6).

In order to combat rape culture there must first be a change in how society treats and understands victims. This is being done at this moment, with every high profile actor or politician that is blacklisted or impeached. It's being done through harsher sentencing of rapists, and it is being done through a change in literature.

In this thesis I will examine two vastly different eras of literature. First, I will focus on a rather large era that encompasses the 18th and 19th centuries, and four of some of the most influential authors of the time. In these stories I will examine just how each of these authors portray abuse against women and how the events of their stories play into the modern age term

of “rape culture”. I will look at how women are abused both physically, through rape, beatings, and sexual coercion, and mentally, through the blatant dismissal of their concerns and questions and the onslaught of verbal abuse that they receive in regards especially to their sexuality. I will also examine how all of these women’s stories end, be it happily or tragically.

Secondly, I will look at four modern day novels, all written within the last forty years, and how they address abuse against women and rape culture. I will examine the woman’s reaction to their abuse, how they view their assailant and how they view themselves post-assault, while also examining how they fight back against their assailant, be it physically or through law enforcement channels. Finally, I will review how their stories end in comparison to their female counterparts in the novels and tales written just a few centuries ago.

This thesis will examine how rape culture and abuse against women has changed drastically within the last few hundred years of literature, because it is an unwavering truth that literature and stories affect the public opinion greatly. When women are abused and ridiculed in novels and yet they come out of these stories stronger and more resilient, it shows just how much public opinion has changed for victims of assault, and how, hopefully, it will continue to do so.

Chapter 1:

Throughout much of history women have been considered the weaker sex. Fragile, emotional, unstable, and unimportant. They were used as accessories and objects of sexual gratification and were susceptible to constant derision by their male counterparts. Even today, in a far more modern and progressive society, much of the world continues to view the female sex as “less than”. There are a plethora of historical texts and documents that can be utilized in proving this disparity between the sexes, but even in venturing away from the realm of non-fiction, and into that of literature, the same conclusions can be drawn. In this chapter, I will be examining four major texts all written between the late 18th century and the late 19th century: *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* by the Brothers Grimm, *The Misfortunes of Virtue* by Marquis de Sade, *Notes from the Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. All of these texts contain some type of abuse against women, be it the horrific violence and sexual assault seen in Marquis de Sade’s text, the grisly murder featured in a fairy tale narrative, or the emotional abuse that is prevalent in both Dostoevsky’s and Perkins Gilman’s stories, there is a lesson being taught about a woman’s role in her own abuse, be it an accusatory or an understanding one. No matter the type of abuse or the lesson being taught, there is one thing that is decidedly true about all of these texts, and it is the way that women are used as an accessory to men. The women in all of these stories are not seen as individuals, as their own persons, rather they are seen as extensions of the male characters within the story. These 18th and 19th century texts largely focus on how women are used by men to progress a story, to better their lives, or to act as their playthings – no matter the physical or emotional toll it takes on them.

Fairy tales have long been used to lull children to sleep, to entertain them during the day, to teach lessons and to strike awe into their hearts and minds. They've been adapted into movies and plays, and have been the pinnacle of childhood entertainment for decades and decades, due especially to the help of media companies like Pixar and Disney. The majority of these popular fairy tales come from a collection, written by the Brothers Grimm in the 18th century, and aptly named *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. The brothers gleaned the collection through intense research of Germany's culture and folklore, before publishing multiple adaptations. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* have long been lauded as a revolutionary piece of literature for its time. The brothers primary focus with publishing their collection was to salvage relics from the past, and it would seem that they have done so. Their work inspired a movement to record culture and history through the story, with many folklorists in other European countries following suit (Cannato 1). The stories that the Brothers Grimm recorded and collected were, and continue to be, a major influence on how the world views culture and social interactions. So much so, that UNESCO lists their first edition of the collection, *Kinder – und Hausmärchen (Children and Household Tales)* on their Memory of the World Registry, which was created in order to preserve enormously important and influential documentary heritage (About).

Due to the raw, brusque form of these recorded tales there is no surprise that they can harbor within them a particular type of abuse and violence, specifically against women. One story from the collection, however, stands out amongst the rest when it comes to such abuse: "The Robber Bridegroom". This short tale tells the story of a young woman who is given away as a bride by her father to a strange man with a sordid past. She knows nothing of her soon to be spouse, but she can sense that something is off: "The maiden...did not like him quite so much as a girl should like the man to whom she is engaged, and had no confidence in him. Whenever she

saw, or thought of him, she felt a secret horror” (Grimm 110). Despite her discomfort in her own fiancé, she is forced to marry him, as her father commanded it. As the story continues, the reader discovers that the young woman was correct in her concerns and intuition about her betrothed, finding that he and his horde of friends are savage women-killers and cannibals after he invites her to visit him at his home. When she arrives, an old woman greets her and tells her that her fiancé is a murderer and that she must hide. In doing so, she witnesses the terrible crime that her fiancé commits: “They dragged with them another young girl...they tore off her delicate raiment, laid her on a table, cut her beautiful body in pieces and strewed salt thereon” (Grimm 111). The young woman, knowing that her betrothed wished to inflict the same fate upon her as he and his friends had on the other innocent girl, escaped the house with the older woman’s help and fled back home. Veering away from the obvious plotline of the tale, it is important to focus in on the undertones of what is being said about the female opinion in this story, which is plainly: it does not matter. The reader can decipher this through many different clues, the most obvious being the bride’s lack of participation in choosing her own husband. It can be argued that, yes, this was common during the time the story was written and recited, and thus would not seem to be such an outrageous breach of autonomy as it would in modern, westernized culture. Despite the cultural differences of the time, I believe that it is important to address these types of abuses, regardless of whether or not they were a normal practice during the time of the publication. I believe that the reiteration of these cultural norms in past literature only gave power to the abuses, and surely further normalized them, thus I argue that morally wrong is still morally wrong, despite whether the majority of the individuals of said time would agree or not.

Secondly, a subtler example of how little value a woman’s opinion has to the men that surround her is seen in the young woman’s “secret horror” that she feels about her fiancé. The

term “secret horror” is profound simply because it tells the reader that this young woman does not feel like she can share her discomfort and wariness about her husband with anyone. She keeps her distrust and her fear to herself, and because of this it can be inferred that she keeps her horror a secret because no one would believe her or take her fear seriously, especially the men in her life. This is an all too common trait in modern day rape culture: the dismissal of a young woman’s worries as being paranoid and over-the-top. It’s a concept that Kate Harding writes of in her book *Asking for It*. Women of all ages are told what to do and what not to do in order to avoid abuse from men: not wearing your hair in a ponytail, always keeping your car doors locked at a stoplight, not jogging with headphones in, and on and on goes the list of precautions and checklists. They’re told to be cautious, to use their brains, but as Harding points out, this is a real-life catch-22:

If we get assaulted while walking alone in the dark, we’re told we should have used our heads and anticipated the danger. But if we’re honest about the amount of mental real estate we devote to anticipating danger, then we’re told we’re acting like crazy man-haters, jumping at shadows and tarring an entire gender with the brush that rightly belongs to a relatively small number of criminals.

(Harding 30)

Harding’s point is that no matter how women act in a world of rape culture – either overly cautious or not cautious enough – they are assumed to be in the wrong, and at least somewhat at fault for the crimes committed against them. The young woman in “The Robber Bridegroom” for some reason feels that she must keep her discomfort and fear a secret, despite her intuition being proven correct in the end. The reader can infer, therefore, that the young woman knows her fears will not be taken seriously, and therefore feels the need to keep them hidden. Even in a tale

written near 200 years ago it is still easy to find the same aspects of today's rape culture present in the literature, wherein a young woman is used as a chess piece in the game of men, her mouth silenced out of fear for being dismissed.

The Misfortunes of Virtue written by Marquis de Sade in the late 18th century is a novel that presents the notion that women are objects for man's pleasure and should be used as such. Sade does not sugarcoat his intentions or his values in his writings. There is no reading between the lines, no subtle themes to pick up on when it comes to a woman's worth. For Sade, it is simple: there is no morality, and there is no such thing as living a virtuous life. The world is evil and will remain so, and anyone who thinks otherwise is a fool and is deserving of the punishment that the world inflicts upon them. It is important to note that Sade was not a popular writer during his time, and though rape culture was still present during 18th century France, it was not commonly taken to the sadistic extremes that Sade tends to be a supporter of. In this book the reader can clearly decipher how Sade felt about women, but even so, Sade never hid these feelings, and was an active participant in abusing women:

On Easter Sunday morning 1768 Sade picked up Rose Keller, an unemployed cotton spinner, and took her to a house he had rented...She claimed that, against her will, he beat her, cut her flesh with a small knife, and poured hot sealing-wax on the wounds before she managed to climb out of a window and escape. Sade admitted to the beating but denied having used a knife, stated that the 'wax' was a soothing lotion, and added that whores were paid for what they did and should not complain. (Coward X)

Marquis de Sade was a monster of a man, and yet, we read his literature today. There is no denying his influence in the world, as even his name has lent itself to common words like

“sadism”, and “sadistic”, but there is also no denying that his ideas and his writing are founding blocks for modern day rape culture. In fact, since the early 20th century and on, there has been a sort of revival of his works and an almost “fan-club” like atmosphere around some of his most ardent scholars - many of which argue that Sade was more genius than deviant (Lichfield). In addition, they would argue that Sade was simply misunderstood, and that he is comparable to Rousseau or Voltaire as a champion of France’s enlightenment movement – even though his works were banned until the 1950’s (Lichfield). There seems to be, in some scholarly circles, a rebranding of Sade as the hero, and so, despite his novels being exceptionally candid with their blatant disregard for a woman’s worth, it is important to address and understand his views so as to better combat them in modern culture.

The plotline of *The Misfortunes of Virtue* is quite simple: two sisters are abandoned and then orphaned and left to fend for themselves in an unforgiving world, namely, pre-revolutionary France. One sister, Juliette, chooses to use her sexuality to gain access to the hierarchy of the social class system, while the other sister, Justine, chooses to maintain her “virtue” as Sade would say. Meaning, of course, that Justine refuses to use her sexuality as a bargaining chip with the men who demand that she does so in order for her to receive their help. I will not speak on which choice is more noble, or cleverer, as I believe this to be beside the point. Both of these women should be allowed to use their sexuality as they please, as is the view of modern day feminism, and the anti-view or rape culture. However, it is clear that Sade believes that one choice is better than the other. The narrator of the text comments early on about how the two sisters will end up with different lifestyles due to the individual use of their sexuality: Juliette will be rich and living lavishly, while Justine will suffer for her “foolish...virtuous” (Sade 4), inclinations. Early on, we see exactly what Sade thinks of this virtue: “As a little girl Justine had

been coddled by her mother's seamstress and, thinking that this woman would be moved by her plight, sought her out, told her of her distressed circumstances, asked for work, and was sent away with harsh words" (Sade 4). Justine had been "coddled" into thinking that anyone would want to help her in this cruel, harsh world. As Sade sees it, it is Justine's own foolishness and naiveté that brings these harsh treatments upon her, just as he thinks that the woman he tortured and abused himself deserved what she got simply because she used sex work as a way to provide for herself and her family. To Sade, though he seems to believe that a woman using her sexuality to her advantage is more respectable than withholding it for reasons of virtue, it also seems that he truly does not think either is good enough to deserve respect. To Sade, it is clear that no matter what a woman does with her sexuality, she deserves any brutality that is given to her by men.

While the last two novels have shown abuse against women in a more physical way, the next two that I will examine will cover emotional and psychological abuse against women. The first, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, stars a male protagonist who is a spiteful recluse. He seems to both hate and adore himself, while simultaneously looking down upon everyone around him. He's quick to anger and slow to forgiveness, and he is quite rude, with not a friend in sight. Throughout the novel the reader is privy to his inner thoughts and perceptions of those around him. While he mostly interacts with men throughout the short novel, he finds himself in the company of one woman: a sex worker named Liza. The Underground Man and Liza meet at a brothel, where he pays her for sex, and then proceeds to insult her until she is in tears:

And when you're dying, they'll all abandon you, they'll all turn away from you – because what good are you then? They'll even reproach you for uselessly taking

up space and not dying quickly enough. You'll have a hard time getting a drink of water, they'll give it to you with a curse: "Hurry up and croak, you slut; you're moaning, people can't sleep, the clients are disgusted." It's true... you'll die... no one will bless you, no one will sigh over you, all they'll think is how to get you off their backs quickly. (Dostoevsky 102)

When the Underground Man finally realizes that Liza is crying, he apologizes, gives her his home address and asks her to come by. Yet when she does and proves herself to be too kind to him after all that he had said to her, he berates her once more and kicks her out of his house, but not before throwing money at her simply to insult her further. The Underground Man does not hit Liza, nor does he rape her. He pays for the services she offers, and yet, he abuses her in a completely different, yet arguably just as traumatizing, way: through verbal abuse. To the Underground Man, the only defining quality that Liza has is her status as a sex worker.

Therefore, he feels justified in his abuse, by telling her over and over again, in a myriad of different ways, that she is worthless and unloved, that she is nothing and never will be in the eyes of society. He speaks of her eventual death callously and cruelly, simply to hurt her for whatever imagined offense she has committed against him. To the Underground Man, because Liza uses her sexuality as a business, one that he willingly and happily partakes in, she is deserving of his abuse.

All of these examples, of course, can be thrown away by the analysis of how the reader is supposed to react to the Underground Man's actions towards Liza – in that the reader is supposed to think that the Underground Man is a horrific person. Dostoevsky himself would claim that the Underground Man is not a good person, and that the reader should at no point think that he is. However, the most telling reason as to why the Underground Man treats Liza this way is because

he thinks that is what a man is supposed to do when he meets a sex worker. The Underground Man lives in his books. He spends much of his day, his week, his year reading and writing and conjuring up stories and fabricated grievances in his mind. He lives in fiction, so much so, that during his first lecture to Liza, she stops him and says that he sounds “just like a book” (Dostoevsky 97). If the Underground Man learns how to interact with others through literature, then it is only fair to assess that his literature is telling him that women, especially ones who use their sexuality, are to be berated and belittled. So while the reader is supposed to think that the Underground Man is a unsympathetic narrator, it is clear that Dostoevsky is making a larger point about how large of an influence literature can have on an individual, and how it can shape their actions and attitudes towards others. Intentional or not, *Notes from Underground* can be read as a commentary on the influences of literature on real life situations, and more specifically, how reading novels and stories that support rape culture and abuse against women, can perpetuate the cycle of abuse.

The final work that I will examine in this chapter is the only one written by a woman. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a short story written in the late 19th century, during a time when feminist writings were few and far between. Perkins Gilman is perhaps the only author in this section who writes stories that include abuse against women in order to progress specific feminist narratives. Perkins Gilman herself suffered from blatant misogyny and medical misdiagnoses due to her sex. After the birth of her first daughter, Perkins Gilman suffered a severe bout of post-partum depression. Due to the era in which she lived, women who reported feeling seriously ill after childbirth were dismissed as “hysterical” and “nervous” (Jennifer). She sought the help of a nerve specialist during this time, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who diagnosed her with exhaustion of nerves. He prescribed her a treatment theory that he

himself had pioneered called Rest Cure. It involved the patient basically introducing themselves into a near comatose state where they were not allowed to leave their bed, write, read, talk, or feed herself. During this treatment she nearly slipped into a full mental breakdown, before uprooting herself and moving to California from the east coast, but not before divorcing her first husband, a nearly unheard-of occurrence in the 19th century. After this experience Perkins Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* and sent a copy to Dr. Mitchell, who she never heard back from, but who apparently changed his treatment plan for “nervous women” (Jennifer). Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a staunch feminist and a leader for women’s rights during her lifetime. Her works show just how the mistreatment of women is detrimental to both women and men, and it is why I believe her work so important to discuss in this chapter.

The Yellow Wallpaper features a female protagonist who is writing in secret as her husband will not allow her to do anything that might fatigue her mind. She has post-partum depression, and her physician husband has taken her away to a secluded estate where she is confined to one room in the house. She is unable to interact with her newborn child, or any guests unless she is directly told she can by her husband. She feels helpless and stuck, and it is because she is: “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?” (Perkins Gilman 1) The woman complains constantly to her husband that she dislikes the estate, that she feels lonely and would like to spend time with people other than him, and that she particularly does not like the wallpaper in their bedroom, but her husband ignores her. He tells her that she is silly, that she’s a “dear thing” who does not know herself better than he does. He tells her that she’s getting better already, despite her telling him that she feels worse: “You really are better, dear, whether you can see it

or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know” (Perkins Gilman 9). He condescends to her until she finally falls silent, fearful that if she shares more with her husband, she’ll be laughed at or called silly once more. The problem with all of this, despite the obvious dismissal of an individual’s feelings and own self-evaluations, is that untreated post-partum depression can lead to far more horrific events taking place, which is of course, what happens to our narrator.

After she begins to see a woman “creeping” behind the yellow wallpaper that she despises so much, she begins to believe that the woman is caged behind the intricate yellow pattern, and that she needs the narrator’s help to escape. As our protagonist falls further and further into her delusions, and as her pleas for her husband to hear and understand her fall on deaf, stubborn ears, she begins to hatch a plan to help the woman behind the wallpaper escape. She has, what many would call, a manic break. She locks herself in her room, throws the key down the foyer and begins to crawl around on all fours, tearing the wallpaper away from the wall. Her husband eventually catches on, finds the key and unlocks the door, and finds the state that his dear wife is in: “‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you...and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back’” (Perkins Gilman 15). Our narrator has identified herself with the trapped woman behind the wallpaper. She feels like a bird in a cage, and her husband the captor. She has been told again and again that she is wrong, too silly to understand her own body and her own mind. She has been dismissed simply because she is a woman and her husband a man, one of which is clearly superior than the other in his mind.

It can be argued that the woman’s husband was simply doing what he thought best for his wife, and that he was not in any way trying to intentionally hurt her, and while I agree, I believe this dismissal of a woman’s concern, especially health concerns, is a larger problem in society, that is fueled by misogyny. In a paper entitled *The Girl Who Cried Pain* by University of

Maryland academics Diane Hoffman and Anita Tarzian, an analysis of how gender bias affects treatment of women was examined. Through the examination of several previous studies, the two conclude that women are more likely to be given sedatives for pain, while men are more likely to be given pain medication (Schopen). Women are disregarded by health professionals as being overly sensitive, or hysterical, and this is what happened with Perkins Gilman, and with her protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It is because of her husband's overconfidence, and his inability to empathize and take his wife's complaints as something more than silly woman talk, that our narrator falls deeper and deeper into the well of her disease, unable to escape now that she's become a captive. She frees herself from her husband's neglect, but the damage from his sexism, be it intentional or not, has already been done.

All of the stories reviewed in this chapter are spread out between two centuries of literature. They are all written in different eras, and yet I believe all of them show effectively how abuse against women has endured. Many, if not all of them, show aspects of modern day rape culture, be it the dismissal of a woman's opinion or the mocking and scorn associated with how any woman uses her sexuality. The outcome is always the same however: none of these women's stories end happily. Some end better than others, such as the young woman from *The Robber's Bridegroom*, but even in that story it is expected that the young woman will be given away to another man without her consent, simply because she is seen as property, and the reader cannot be sure that her fate will be any less horrible. All in all, these female victims of abuse and rape culture are tortured, raped, verbally abused and manipulated until they either break or die. They are used as extensions to the men that surround them. Given away as property, used for sexual gratification, judged and ridiculed for using their sexuality, even by the men who gladly partake in the use of said sexuality, and made a guinea pig for their physician husband's

experiments. These women suffer physically and mentally in order for their male counterparts to feel better, happier, in charge. They suffer simply because they are women, and simply because that makes them objects in the eyes of men.

Chapter 2:

As the world turns so does society evolve, and with it comes the changing of social norms. What once was accepted is now condemned, and what once was ridiculed is now praised. With the changing of the seasons come the inevitable advancement of human society - specifically in terms of sexism and gender norms. No longer are men and women provided with a rigid set of rules that they must follow in order to be deemed “real men” or “real women”. Instead, this timely revolution encourages emotional vulnerability and enduring strength in ways that do not tie into an individual’s gendered identity. In the previous novels examined in this thesis a common theme of a woman’s purported weakness is evident throughout all of the excerpts and characters. Women were deemed powerless and feeble, as well as unable to overcome the violence and tragedies that they endured. Their stories ended unhappily. In this chapter, however, I will be examining four major modern texts, all of which have been widely popular throughout the last few decades: *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. All five of these texts feature women who suffer abuse of some form, be it physical or sexual, and yet all of them show outstanding resilience, and in some cases, seek out their own kind of revenge. These modern texts seemingly aim to demolish the past conceptions of what it means to be a woman of abuse, and the relationship between victim and their abuser, by exhibiting a wide array of woman from varying backgrounds who struggle and ultimately overcome their abuse in different but remarkable ways. These texts show the resiliency of women, no matter their age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Abuse and domestic violence stem across a varying range of ages. There is no age group that is exempt from such horrors, and Laurie Halse Anderson’s young adult novel, *Speak*, is a

beautifully written representation of such a truth. The main character, Melinda, is a freshman in high school who is suffering from past trauma that occurred over the summer. Everyone in the school is angry with her, and she has become a pariah among not only her own class, but the entire student body. She becomes an island in her school, and all because she called the police after being raped at a house party, subsequently incriminating all who attended. Melinda must then continue to go to the same school as her abuser, Andy, and suffer more abuse at his hands. She does not speak throughout the novel, due to both the trauma she has suffered and the guilt she feels for getting her classmates in trouble, but even so, her memories recount the story for the reader: "I'm definitely back at Rachel's, crimping my hair and gluing on fake nails, and he smells like beer and mean and he hurts me hurts me hurts me and gets up, and zips his jeans, and smiles" (Anderson 132). This small memory encapsulates the near full account of Melinda's rape, and yet even these small number of words capture the horror of her situation. The novel addresses a myriad of difficulties that abused women face in society, but most importantly the reader sees how Melinda recovers from her trauma, and helps not only her classmates and her friends, but herself too.

Throughout the novel Melinda feels a constant sense of isolation and guilt. She feels as though no one understands what she went through, and even if they did they wouldn't side with her. She feels, as she says, like an "outcast" (Anderson 6). Because of the anger of her classmates she isolates herself further, speaking to almost no one and skipping school often. Throughout all of this she is constantly dealing with her own guilt. Like many assault victims, she feels as if she could have done something to stop the abuse. She scours her memory and tries to find a detail, no matter how small, that will help incriminate herself, and allow for a better understanding as to why this trauma happened to her. Melinda knows that Andy has wronged

her, and has hurt her, but she still finds ways to blame herself: “BunnyRabbit bolts, leaving fast tracks in the snow. Getaway, getaway, getaway. Why didn’t I run like this before when I was a one-piece talking girl?” (Anderson 84) Melinda beats herself up for not running from Andy, or trying in some way to escape. She feels that if she had simply tried harder to fight back then she would be fine right now, normal and accepted in her community. This is a common feeling among victims of rape or domestic abuse. Many victims blame themselves, and it’s no wonder why. In a world where women are constantly being told what to do to prevent a rapist from raping them, instead of telling men not to rape. Harding speaks of this in her novel, *Asking for It*:

The ubiquitous idea that by controlling our behavior, appearance, and whereabouts we can keep ourselves from being raped does nothing to help women (let alone potential victims who aren’t women). It merely takes the onus off the rest of society to seriously consider what we *all* can do to prevent sexual violence. It keeps our focus on what the victims did ‘wrong’ instead of on what type of person rapes, or how he chooses his victims, or how we can prosecute sexual assaults more effectively. It trades on reductive, sexist ideas about how ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women behave and strongly suggests that some victims, frankly, had it coming. (Harding 33).

Melinda feels a sense of blame for her own assault, most likely because her whole life she has been fed lines and lists on what a young woman should do in a scenario of sexual assault.

Thankfully, as the novel continues Melinda eventually realizes that the guilt lies nowhere with her, and instead all with her abuse, but she only reaches this point when she encounters a unique solution in her schoolwork.

Melinda, desperate to feel anything despite apathy and guilt, finds an escape in her art class and a rare friend in her teacher, Mr. Freeman. Throughout the novel, Melinda continues to work on a project for her art class, and as Melinda changes and transforms, so does her art. Mr. Freeman is one of the only confidantes that Melinda has during her freshman year, and one of the only adults she feels comfortable being around. By the end of the novel, we see how both art and a kind person have changed Melinda for the better, and have helped her overcome her past trauma: “The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up” (Anderson 204). At the very end of the novel, Melinda finally speaks, and opens up to Mr. Freeman about what happened to her over the summer. Her passion for art matches his own, and it was this commonality, and his unwillingness to give up on a troubled student, that leads Melinda to finally free herself of all the bottled-up anger, guilt, and sadness that she has been harboring since the beginning of the school year. It helps, also, that her abuser’s crimes are exposed to the entire school and student body, and she is finally welcomed back into the community that had once shamed her.

Oftentimes age is associated with inexperience, and the inability to make mature, life-changing decisions. In *Speak*, however, the reader is introduced to a young girl who has suffered a terrible degree of trauma, and yet through her own perseverance and the help of a small collection of individuals, she is able to overcome her abuse, and to find an understanding within herself – rather than maintain a guilty conscience. *Speak* is a modern novel meant to be read by young adults, and it holds within its pages an invaluable lesson: that women are strong and resilient and able to help themselves, despite their age.

Just as abuse is not suffered by a specific age group, neither is it suffered by a specific ethnicity. In Alice Walker's award-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, Celie, an African American woman living in rural Georgia suffers terrible abuse by the most important men in her life: her father and her husband. Celie is not only raped and sexually assaulted by these men, but she is also physically beaten multiple times throughout the novel. Through the help of the fellow women around her, however, Celie comes to realize her own sexual identity and her own strength, and finds solace in a world that has only ever been cruel to her.

Celie's abuse starts early on in her life with her father, Pa. He treats her more like a slave than a daughter, and doesn't worry about her happiness or her consent: "He [Pa] never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never get used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook" (Walker 3). Celie's father rapes her repeatedly throughout her life, even during her childhood years. Not only does he abuse her, but he forces her to fulfill what essentially boils down to the "womanly duties" of a wife. As she grows older he eventually pawns her off to an older man, Mr. ___, who is really in love with Celie's sister. Mr. ___ continues the abuse that Celie's father began. He beats her and uses her for sex, all while still being in love with both Celie's sister and a singer named Shug. He continually justifies his abuse against Celie: "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. ___ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for – he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa" (Walker 42). Mr. ___ tells his son that he beats his wife simply because she is his wife, and therefore is his property.

Women were seen as animals, as the person who satisfied sexual desires and cooked and cleaned. This is the only life Celie knows at the beginning of the novel.

Celie is trapped in a cycle of abuse, one that she thinks is normal, and inescapable. But through the help of many different women, most importantly Shug, the mistress of her husband, Celie begins to realize that what she is experiencing is not love and is not normal. Throughout the novel Celie begins to realize her sexual identity, and begins to develop feelings, both romantic and sexual for Shug. Eventually, Celie, after suffering a life of sexual abuse, has her first fulfilling sexual experience with Shug: “She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. *Um*, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back say, *um*, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other” (Walker). Eventually, throughout the novel, Celie distances herself from her husband, and begins a life anew with Shug, and eventually on her own. She even befriends Mr. ___, her former abuser, and forgives him for his past transgressions against her. *The Color Purple* is a novel that shows the recovery a women can make after sexual and physical abuse, and Celie is a perfect example of an abused women finding her independence and her own self through the help of other women despite past trauma.

The final two books that I will address in this chapter feature women from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, and yet all of them suffer abuse at the hands of men. *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins centers around three different women, and all of their experiences with the same man. Rachel, the forgotten divorcee, is the main protagonist of the novel. A woman who was once blissfully happy in her relationship, who lived in moderate wealth and comfort with her husband, Tom, is now poor and living with a roommate after her ex-husband’s infidelity and now marriage to his mistress. When a woman goes missing in Rachel’s town she

becomes obsessed with figuring out what happened to her, and as the reader discovers, it all links back to her Tom. However, it is through the aide of her former romantic rival that Rachel and Anna, the former mistress, find an escape from the abuse they both suffer, even if all the endings don't turn out so happily.

Throughout the novel the reader discovers much more about Tom and his repeated infidelities. He had an affair with Anna while married to Rachel, and then he had an affair with Megan, his neighbor, while married to Anna. The reader learns that he has abused Rachel in a fit of anger while she was intoxicated, and that in the end, he killed Megan to keep her from having their child that was conceived within the affair: “‘Christ, she just wouldn’t fucking shut up. So...I don’t know, I just need her to stop. So I picked up a rock...I didn’t mean for this. I just wanted her to stop. She was bleeding a lot. She was crying, making a horrible noise. She tried to crawl away from me. There was nothing I could do. I had to finish it” (Hawkins 309). Tom defends his actions by claiming that Megan wouldn’t stop. She was screaming and crying and eventually making a “horrible noise” after he had beaten her, and in order to subdue her further he “finishes” the job by beating her until she has finally died. As he tells his story to Anna and Rachel he is pacing around the room, picking up and putting down his and Anna’s daughter. He is still trying to be a normal husband, and yet he cannot accept any of the blame for what he has done.

Throughout the novel it is a common theme that the men who abuse turn the abuse around on the women. It was their fault. They were too drunk – as Tom says after he admits to beating Rachel. They were a liar and a cheater – as Scott, Megan’s husband, says after he beats her. The women are the victims and the perpetrators of their abuse. The men in the novel believe that they abuse the women in their life out of love: “He [Scott] grabbed the photograph of the

two of us that he loves . . . and threw it as hard as he could at my head. As it smashed against the wall behind me, he lunged . . . his forearm across my throat . . . he closed his eyes so he didn't have to watch me choke. . . . 'Megan, I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm so sorry that I hurt you'" (Hawkins 290). Scott, after finding out about Megan's infidelity, chokes her, and when she finally escapes and locks herself in a room, he begins to cry and beg and apologize to her. He says he feels badly, that he would never have done it if the circumstances had been different, and all in all, he blames her for his own abusive behavior. Just as Tom justifies killing Megan, and as he justifies lying, cheating on, and beating Rachel: "'You lied to me,' I [Rachel] say. 'You told me everything was my fault. You made me believe that I was worthless. You watched me suffer, you –' He [Tom] shrugs. 'Do you have any idea how boring you became, Rachel? How ugly? Too sad to get out of bed in the morning, too tired to take a shower or wash your fucking hair? Jesus. It's no wonder I lost patience, is it? It's no wonder I had to look for ways to amuse myself. You've no one to blame but yourself.'" (Hawkins 299). Tom gives example after example as to why he had to cheat on Rachel, as to why she suffered any abuse that he gave her, and all of his reasons lead back to her, and her inability to be exactly who and what he wanted her to be. The abusive men in *The Girl on the Train* either blame their abusive behavior on their passionate love for their wives or on their wives' own shortcomings. No one but the abused are at fault for the crimes of the abuser.

Despite the harrowing amount of abuse against women in *The Girl on the Train* the reader is yet again given an ending that is relatively happy for most of the women in the novel. While Megan loses her life to the abuse, Rachel and Anna are able to overcome it through their combined effort. When Tom aims to attack Rachel at his home she is able to kill him with a corkscrew that she found in the house. Tom dies, and the duo recounts to the police that it was all

out of self-defense. At the end of the novel Rachel recounts her last encounter with Anna: “The last time I saw her was in the police station, when she took us to give our statements. She was led to one room and I to another, but just before she parted, she touched my arm. ‘You take care of yourself, Rachel,’ she said, and there was something about the way she said it that made it feel like a warning. We are tied together, forever bound by the stories we told: that I had no choice but to stab him in the neck; that Anna tried her best to save him” (Hawkins 323). By the end of the novel the women have reached a sort of peace treaty with one another. While neither of them particularly want to be friends, or even see the other again, they have bonded together as women who understand what it’s like to be a woman, and what it’s like to suffer abuse at the hands of a man you loved. *The Girl on the Train* is a perfect representation of the power of united womanhood, even on a basis of non-friendship.

The final novel that will be addressed in this chapter is *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson. The main female protagonist of the novel, Lisbeth Salander, is a woman who grew up in near poverty all while dealing with a myriad of mental health and family issues. During the novel she is primarily abused by her guardian, Bjurman, a man who is supposed to be watching over and caring for her. Salander is, however, not the kind of woman to take kindly to such abuse, and more so than any of the other female protagonists in this chapter, retaliates viciously.

After Bjurman brutally rapes and abuses Salander one evening, she decides to enact her revenge by filming him the next time she visits his home. However, Bjurman changes the routine on her and rapes her far more brutally than she had ever anticipated. Still, Salander visits Bjurman once more at his home, subdues him, ties him up, and enacts the near same torture that he enacted on her, and then lets him know just how serious she is: “She got down from the bed,

cocked her head to one side, and regarded her handiwork with a critical eye. Here artistic talents were limited. The letters looked at best impressionistic. She had used red and blue ink. The message was written in caps over five lines that covered his belly, from his nipples to just above his genitals: I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST” (Larsson 263). Salander not only let’s Bjurman know that she will release the video of her rape should he disobey any order she gives him, but she also makes sure he will never lead a normal life again, by tattooing the above words into his abdomen. The revenge enacted by her is nothing like what has been seen in the other novels mentioned in this chapter. Even though violence by victim towards abuser has been seen, there was no reenactment of abuse, and no continuation of it. Salander provides the reader a very different, and a rarely seen version of an abused woman. She is not content to simply receive justice for the transgressions made against her, rather she must make her abuser suffer as she did. Though I do not condone this type of abuse, even in the form of revenge for a horrific crime, I think it is important to see just how drastically modern female abuse victims have changed in their literary representation. Salander is a beloved character, and the reader is supposed to continue to support her after this extreme act of violence, whereas in past literature, a woman would never be represented in such a favorable way, especially if they committed the same acts that Salander did.

The four novels reviewed in this section have all been widely popular in the last few decades, and all of them show a type of literary woman that was so rarely seen before. They show women who are capable and willing to make the best of their abuse, who are daring and dangerous. They show women who are not weak, and who do not stand idly by. They show resilience and power in the face of abuse. Truly, they show the real representation of women in modern society.

Conclusion:

The world is ripe with injustices. Individuals are murdered and abused every day. And yet, many argue that the citizens of the world today are living in the safest and most comfortable time ever. There are more and more countries with fair and balanced law systems, or as fair and balanced as something created by fallible human beings can be. There are more and more countries with democracy, with individual, intrinsic rights, and yet, the world is not a utopia. Bad things continue to happen, bad people continue to thrive, and the world still lies in the shadow of what can be called a “darkness”.

Literature, however, has been used as a method of escape from this darkness for centuries, and stories have been orally shared for even longer. The power of a story is immeasurable. The effect that it has on the opinions and mindsets of individuals cannot be placed on a scale and given a number. It cannot be traced, but it can be seen. It can be seen through the study of literature and the differences in how characters are treated. There is less blatant racism in modern day books, less homophobia, less slurs. There is a greater empathy for victims, and this can be seen especially in regard to the character of the abused woman.

In this thesis I’ve presented eight different stories. Half of which were written over a hundred years ago, and the other half written in the past four decades. There is a clear difference in how female victims of abuse are treated in these stories. The older stories portray women as weak, or at the very least, unable to have their voices be heard against the onslaught of the male opinion. They are tortured and raped, verbally abused and dismissed, and in the end, they have nothing to show for their abuse. Their stories end in tragedy or in a sense of unknowingness. They do not overcome their tragedies, they fall victim to a cruel and harsh world, and must either

adapt or find themselves broken. They embody the traits of a modern-day culture of rape and violence. They are mocked and ridiculed for either the use or disuse of their sexuality, and they are never taken seriously until it is either too late, or until they have some sort traumatic experience.

The second half, the more modern-day novels, present the same types of women. Women who are abused, raped, and dismissed. Yet, all of these women, or the vast majority of them, finish their stories on a bright note. They find justice for the crimes committed against them, and sometimes, they even find revenge. It is clear that there has been a shift in how victims of abuse are viewed in modern literature. No longer are they considered weak and helpless, or accessories to men, rather they are seen as resilient warriors, as forces not to be trifled with. These stories, though thoroughly fiction, offer the option to women that there is a different path after abuse. That they are not weak, and they do not have to think that they are. Women of abuse in modern times, while they may not receive the same justice that the women in these novels did, they have the option of turning to these modern-day novels and finding a brighter representation of a character they can relate to. These stories, all of which were, and continue to be, incredibly popular among all genders, show a shift in society. They show how slowly, but surely, rape culture is being dismantled. And while victims are still blamed far too often for their own assaults, they are more likely to be taken seriously, and to garner help than they ever would have been a century or two ago.

Rape culture is real, it is prevalent. Abuse against women is real, and prevalent. But with the continuation of literature that is empowering to women, that is written to show just how resilient and brave women can be, even in the face of their abuser, there will continue to be a

shift in how society views rape, views assault, views domestic violence, and it will be for the better.

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